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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001009

SIPDIS

DEPT ALSO FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/14/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM MK GR

SUBJECT: GREECE/MACEDONIA: GRUEVSKI LETTER ON MINORITIES PROVOKES STRONG REACTION

REF: A. COWAN/HOVENIER E-MAIL OF 7/14/08

1B. ATHENS 873

1C. THESSALONIKI 44

Classified By: A/Political Counselor Jeff Hovenier for 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) This message has been cleared with Embassy Skopje.

SUMMARY

12. (C) Greece reacted negatively to a July 14 letter from Macedonian PM Gruevski to PM Karamanlis requesting that Greece address issues related to property restitution and citizenship of ethnic Macedonians who left Greece following the Second World War and that Greece recognize the Macedonian minority in Greece. The letter, which appears to have been made public by the Macedonian authorities, prompted immediate reactions from GOG officials who dismissed it and suggested it was designed to impede further progress on name negotiations. Opposition politicians also termed the letter "unworthy of comment." Although the timing of the letter appears linked to the ongoing name negotiations, the two issues identified by Gruevski are real. Ethnic Macedonians who left Greece after the civil war appear to face extreme difficulties in reclaiming property or receiving restitution, and Greece has long objected to recognition of any minority in Greece beyond the "Muslim minority" defined in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Gruevski's letter is likely to be cited by Greek officials and commentators as making it even more difficult to advance solutions to these issues. End Summary.

The Letter

13. (U) On July 14, Macedonian PM Gruevski sent a letter to PM Karamanlis raising two topics (ref A):

-- Post-War Reparations and Citizenship: Gruevski notes that during the Greek civil war in the late 1940s, many ethnic Macedonians fled Greece for then-Yugoslavia. Those who departed and their descendants have faced and continue to face difficulties in 1) reclaiming their property, 2) traveling to Greece, and 3) obtaining Greek citizenship, as many wish to be dual citizens.

-- Macedonian Minority: Gruevski asks that Greece "recognize the Macedonian minority" and "ensure basic rights" such as education in the Macedonian language, allowing organizations that would promote cultural traditions and customs, and use of the Macedonian language in government offices where there is a significant percentage of Macedonian residents.

14. (U) Gruevski asks Karamanlis to review these two issues and "put forward a solution to these bitter issues in a

sensible period of time." Gruevski further suggests that expert groups be established to review these issues quickly.

The Greek Response

15. (U) Word of the letter prompted an immediate response from government spokesman Roussopoulos who dismissed it as "repeating well-known and unacceptable statements regarding non-existent minorities," and an effort by Gruevski to "raise new obstacles" in the name negotiations. Roussopoulos said "instead of engaging in this kind of provocative activity . . . Skopje should be trying to convince others, through their actions, that they wish to resolve the problem and build good neighborly relations with Greece." Roussopoulos added that PM Karamanlis would answer the letter formally within a week.

16. (C) Sources in the MFA and Prime Minister's office tell us that the reply is likely to be brief and to the point -- Greece does not recognize a "Macedonian minority," and all issues related to restitution and citizenship for those who left after the civil war are regulated by long-standing government decrees.

17. (U) Meanwhile, major Greek opposition party PASOK termed the letter "unworthy of comment."

Comment: Bad Timing - Real Issues

18. (SBU) In the context of the Greek civil war in the 1940s,

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Greece passed decrees that deprived those who fled Greece of their citizenship and property. In the 1980s, Greece passed decrees restoring citizenship and property rights to ethnic Greeks who had fled. However, there are no similar decrees for those who do not identify themselves as "Greek," including ethnic Macedonians, and they remain with little recourse to reclaim property or to have a potential claim to citizenship adjudicated. On the issue of the Macedonian minority, we have long raised with the GOG the fact that it continues to prevent the self-identification of minority groups, and only recognizes the "Muslim minority" of Trace per the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, and thus impacts number of citizens who identify themselves as Turks, Pomaks (Slavic speaking Muslims), Vlachs, Roma, Arvanites, or Macedonians. While not recognizing them as "minorities," Greece has made some educational accommodations for Turks and Roma. This issue has long been documented in our annual human rights report and is among our recommendations for issues to raise at the OSCE's annual Human Dimension Implementation Review (HDIM) meeting (ref B).

19. (C) Senior Macedonian officials have indicated to Embassy Skopje that Gruevski is raising these issues now because he perceives the latest informal proposals from the UN mediator have included "peripheral issues" to Greece's advantage (e.g., exclusive rights over "Macedonian antiquity"), so putting these ethnic Macedonian concerns in the mix will help counterbalance those issues. However, both sets of issues raised by Gruevski are real issues and part of an ongoing dialogue with the Greeks on human rights issues. Gruevski's letter is likely to be cited by Greek officials and commentators as making it even more difficult to advance solutions to these issues. End Comment.

SPECKHARD